

An On-Chip Design-For-Testing Structure For CMOS APS (Active Pixel Sensor) Image Sensor

Background of the Invention

Field of the Invention

5 This invention relates to electronic circuits and semiconductor devices that will receive light and convert the light to an electronic signal representing the amplitude of the light commonly referred to as photo-sensors or pixel sensors. More particularly this invention relates to methods and apparatus for testing light sensing devices, circuits, and blocks. This invention further identifies the use of
10 such DFT methods and apparatus for testing of functionality and manufacturing process values to assure the operation of photosensors or pixel sensors in providing reliable and accurate electronic shuttering of captured light information as an array of pixels. This invention especially relates to methods and apparatus for testing of circuits and blocks known as active pixel sensors (APS).

Description of Related Art

 Imaging circuits typically include a two dimensional array of photo-sensors. Each photo-sensor comprises one picture element (pixel) of the image. Light energy emitted or reflected from an object impinges upon the array of
20 photo-sensors. The light energy is converted by the photo-sensors to an electrical signal. Imaging circuitry scans the individual photo-sensors to readout

the electrical signals. The electrical signals of the image is processed by external circuitry for subsequent display.

Modern metal oxide semiconductor (MOS) design and processing

5 techniques have been developed that provide for the capture of light as charge and the transporting of that charge within APS and other structures so as to be accomplished with almost perfect efficiency and accuracy.

U. S. Patent 5,841,126 (Fossum, et. al.) describes a CMOS active pixel
10 sensor (APS) type imaging system on a chip. The imaging system consists of an APS and a controller on a single substrate. The controller provides specialized support electronics that are integrate onto the same substrate as the APS array. The controller includes integration, timing, control electronics, signal chain electronics, A/D Conversion, and other important control systems.

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U. S. Patent 5,900,623 (Tsang, et. al.) describes an active pixel sensor implemented with CMOS technology that employs an array of photocells. Each cell includes a photodiode to sense illumination and a separate storage node with a stored charge that is discharged during an integration period by the
20 photocurrent generated by the photodiode. Each photocell includes a switching network that couples the photocurrent to the storage node only during the integration period while ensuring that a relatively constant voltage is maintained across the photodiode during integration and non-integration periods.

While the prior art patents describe the system, circuitry, functioning, and timing of pixel circuits and APS. None of the patents include any aspects of testing apparatus and methods for testing functionality, evaluating performance
 5 or determining capacitance of an APS..

Fig. 1 shows a typical CMOS Active Pixel Sensor (APS) of the prior art, using a photo-diode as a photo-conversion device for example. The drain terminals of the transistors **M1** and **M2** are connected to the power supply
 10 voltage distribution line, V_{DD} . The source of the transistor **M2** is connected to the anode of the photo-diode D_F . The cathode of the photo-diode is connected to the ground reference point. The capacitance C_{FD} is the inherent capacitance of the photo-diode D_F .

15 The gate of the transistor **M2** is connected to a reset terminal to receive the reset signal V_{rst} . The sensor readout node **FD**, that is the anode of the photo-diode D_F , is first reset to a high voltage level (V_{DD}) by changing the reset signal V_{rst} from a low voltage level (0) to a high voltage level (V_{DD}) to charge the capacitance C_{FD} . At the completion of charging the capacitance C_{FD} , the reset
 20 signal V_{rst} is changed from the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to the . Since light is shown on the photo-diode D_F , photo-generated electrons are collected at node **FD** and the voltage at the node **FD** decreases in the process. At the end of the exposure duration the voltage at node **FD** is measured, thus completing one

photo-sensing cycle. The photo-sensing cycle is completed by deactivating the transistor **M3** by changing the row select signal from the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to the low voltage level (0).

5 The gate of the transistor **M1** is connected to the node **FD** and the source of the transistor **M1** is connected to the drain of the transistor **M3**. The transistor **M1** acts as a source follower such that the voltage present at the source of the transistor **M1** "follows" directly the voltage present at the gate of the transistor **M1** and is one transistor threshold voltage V_T below the voltage present at the gate
10 of the transistor **M1**.

 The gate of the transistor **M3** is connected to the row select line to receive the row select signal V_{row} . The source of the transistor **M3** is connected to the column bus **ColBus**. The column bus interconnects all the APS's present on a
15 column of an array of APS's. When the row select signal changes from a low voltage level (0V) to a high level (V_{DD}), the transistor **M3** turns-on and the voltage present at the source of the transistor **M1** is transferred to the output of the APS to couple the voltage that is proportional to the intensity of the light **L**. The output signal V_{out_pixel} of the APS is coupled to the column bus **ColBus** for further
20 conditioning and readout.

 An APS signal conditioning and readout circuit as shown in Fig. 2 and described in Fossum, et. al. is connected to the column bus **ColBus** of each

column of APS's of an array of APS's. The APS signal and readout circuit employs correlated double sampling (CDS) to determine the level of the light L impinging upon the photodiode D_f . Correlated double sampling (CDS) is achieved by sampling both a reset reference level and a signal level. The difference between the signal level and the reset reference level represents the net signal induced by level of the light L illuminating the photodiode D_f . The resulting voltage of the node FD is read out through the transistors $M1$ and $M3$ of the APS pixel circuit of Fig. 1 onto the column bus **ColBus**. The voltage V_{out_pixel} on the column bus **ColBus** is sampled onto a first holding capacitor **C1** by an activation pulse **SHR** to the gate of the transistor **M6**. This initial charge is used as the baseline. After raising the reset signal V_{rst} , the signal charges within the APS pixel circuit due to the impinging of photoelectrons and the capacitance C_{FD} . The resulting voltage V_{out_pixel} is also transferred onto the column bus **ColBus** and sampled onto a second holding capacitor **C2** by an activation pulse **SHS** to the gate of the transistor **M5**. The difference between the voltages on the first capacitor **C1** and the second capacitor **C2** is therefore indicative of the number of photoelectrons of the light L that were allowed to enter the photodiode D_f .

A key element in the calculation of the conversion gain in a CMOS APS imager pixel is the measurement of the capacitance C_{FD} at the pixel readout node, **FD**.

In the prior art, a conventional APS test scheme used to measure the capacitance is shown in Fig. 3. To summarize how such an APS test approach is used, a photo-diode pixel of Fig. 1 is used as an example.

5 The structure of Fig. 1 is modified such that the drain connections of the transistors **M1** and **M2** are separately connected. The drain of **M1** is now connected to the supply line, **V_{DD 1}**, while the drain of **M2** is connected to another supply line, **V_{DD 2}**.

10 The voltage source **VS1** driving the supply line **V_{DD 1}** is set to a voltage level of the power supply voltage source **V_{DD}**. A second voltage source connected to the **V_{DD 2}** line is also set to the same value, the power supply voltage source **V_{DD}**. Bright light is shown on the pixel so that it is saturated. The reset signal **V_{rst}** is pulsed periodically and the resulting average current from the

15 voltage source is measured. The equation relating the measured average current **I** and the capacitance **C_{FD}** on the node **FD** of the photo-diode **D_F** is calculated by the formula:

$$I = dQ/dt = Q_{FD} * dV/dt \quad \text{Eq. 1}$$

20 where:

dt is the period of the reset signal **V_{rst}**

dV is the voltage difference between reset level and saturation level.

The capacitance is therefore:

$$C_{FD} = \frac{I}{dV/dt} \quad \text{Eq. 2}$$

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Although the electrical design of the APS pixel test approach shown in Fig. 2 is similar to the one shown in Fig. 1, the physical layout of the two pixels are quite different. In a normal pixel design, in order to increase the density of the pixels per unit area of the APS's and to reduce the complexity of signal routing, the drains of **M1** and **M2** are connected together to the same supply, V_{DD} , through a single metal line.

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However in the APS cell test approach of the prior art, since the drain connections of transistors **M1** and **M2** in Fig. 3 need to be separated in order to facilitate the above test measurement, two metal lines are needed to route the two drain connections. As a result, the pixel design is less area efficient than a design that includes no special test circuitry.

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In the design approach for imaging products using arrays of APS cells, in actual application, it is preferred that the more efficient pixel in Fig. 1 is used. In order to measure the conversion gain of the pixel design implemented using a particular semiconductor manufacturing process, an additional row of the pixel

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cells implemented using an approach such as shown in Fig. 3 needs to be added to the normal APS pixel array.

In addition, in a conventional APS array embodiment, the additional row of testable APS pixels cannot be covered up by light shielding material to form part of the "dark pixels" normally placed around the active pixels since they must operate under bright light for the measurement.

Summary Of The Invention

It is an objective of this invention is to provide an apparatus for testing an active pixel sensor to ensure that a signal proportional to the quantity of light energy impinging on the active pixel sensor is reliably and accurately captured and made available for further on processing the rest of the APS system circuitry.

It is another objective of this invention is to provide a method and apparatus for determining the capacitance of a photo-conversion device of the active pixel sensor.

Further, it is an object of this invention to provide a method and apparatus for determining that an active pixel sensor is functioning correctly.

Still further, is it is an object of this invention to provide a method and apparatus for determining the performance of an active pixel sensor. Where the performance of the active pixel sensor is a measure of linearity of the active pixel sensor and a connected chain of circuitry that process the signal converted by
5 the photo-conversion device of the active pixel sensor.

To accomplish these and other objectives, an apparatus for testing functionality, evaluating performance and measuring capacitance of a photo-conversion device of at least one active pixel sensor of an array of active pixel
10 sensors has a test voltage selection circuit. The test voltage selection circuit selectively applies any of a plurality of voltage levels that vary incrementally from a first voltage level to a second voltage level to a reference distribution node of the active pixel sensors. The apparatus further has a timing control circuit. The timing control circuit is connected to the test voltage circuit and to the array of
15 active pixel sensors, and to a signal conditioning and readout circuit to provide signals to select timings to select application of the first voltage level and the second voltage level to the reference distribution node of the active pixel sensors, signals at appropriate timings to condition the active pixel sensors in preparation for sensing light impinging upon the array of active pixel sensors, and
20 providing signals for timing the signal conditioning and readout circuit to sense a signal from each active pixel sensor indicating a magnitude of light impinging upon the array of active pixel sensors.

A first embodiment of the test voltage selection circuit includes a first switch. The first switch has a first terminal connected to a first voltage source that provides the first voltage level, a second terminal connected to the reference distribution node of at least one active pixel sensor on a row of active pixel sensors, and a control terminal connected to the controlling circuit to selectively connect and disconnect the first terminal with the second terminal. The test voltage selection circuit has a second switch. The second switch has a first terminal connected to a second voltage source that provides the second voltage level, a second terminal connected to the reference distribution node of at least one active pixel sensor on the row of active pixel sensors in the array of active pixel sensors, and a control terminal connected to the controlling circuit to selectively connect and disconnect the first terminal with the second terminal. The test voltage selection circuit has a current measuring device connected so as to measure a current flowing from the first voltage source.

The timing control circuit enables measurement of the capacitance of the photo-conversion device within one active pixel sensor by selecting the active pixel sensor at a first time. At a second time, the second voltage level is placed at the reference distribution node of the active pixel sensor and simultaneously, at the second time, the second voltage level is coupled to the photo-conversion device. Subsequent to applying the second voltage level to the photo-conversion device, the first voltage level is applied to the reference distribution node at a third time. Simultaneously, at the third time, the first voltage level is coupled to

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the photo-conversion device. The current flowing to the photo-conversion device to charge the capacitance of the photo-conversion device from the first voltage level to the second voltage level is measured. The capacitance of the photo-conversion device is determined by the formula:

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$$C_{FD} = \frac{I}{dV/dt}$$

where

C_{FD} is the total capacitance of the photo-conversion devices and the parasitic capacitance of the test voltage select circuit,

10 I is the current flowing from the first voltage source,

dv is the difference between the first voltage level and the second voltage level, and

dt is a charging time for the capacitance;

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The timing control circuit enables testing functionality of a row of the active pixel sensors within the array of active pixel sensors and the chain of circuitry connecting the selected row of active pixel sensors selecting the row of active pixel sensors at a first time. At a second time, one of the plurality of voltage levels is placed on each reference distribution node of each active pixel sensor.

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The magnitude of the voltage level placed on each reference distribution node is indicative of a position on the row of active pixel sensors of each active pixel sensor. Simultaneously, at the second time, the voltage level of the plurality of voltage levels is coupled to the photo-conversion device to charge the

5 capacitance of the photo-conversion device to the voltage level. The voltage level of the capacitance of each active pixel sensor on the selected row of active pixel sensors sampled and held the within the signal conditioning and readout circuit at a third time. The first voltage level is placed at the reference distribution node of each active pixel sensor on the row of active pixel sensors at a fourth time.

10 Simultaneously, at the fourth time, the first voltage level is coupled to the capacitance of the photo-conversion device of each active pixel sensor of the row of active pixel sensors. At a fifth time, the first voltage level sampled and held on the capacitance of the photo-conversion device of each active pixel sensor on the selected row of active pixel sensors within the signal conditioning and

15 readout circuit. The sampled and held voltage level of the plurality of voltage levels and the sampled and held first voltage level of each active pixel sensor of the selected row of active pixel sensors are then transferred to an output port of the signal conditioning and readout circuit for transfer to external circuitry. The external circuitry differentially compares the sampled and held voltage level of

20 the plurality of voltage levels with the sampled and held first voltage level and the functionality of each active pixel sensor on the selected row of active pixel sensors, and the chain of circuitry connected to each active pixel sensor of the row of active pixel sensors is determined as a function of a difference between

the sampled and held voltage level of the plurality of voltage levels and the sampled and held first voltage level.

The timing and control circuit enables evaluating performance of at least one active pixel sensor and the chain of circuitry connected to the active pixel sensor by selecting the active pixel sensor at a first time. At a second time, the second voltage level is placed at the reference distribution node of the active pixel sensor. Simultaneously, at the second time, the second voltage level is coupled to the capacitance of the photo-conversion device. The second voltage level sampled and held the within the signal conditioning and readout circuit at a third time. At a fourth time, the first voltage level is placed at the reference distribution node of the active pixel sensor and simultaneously, the first voltage level is coupled to the capacitance of the photo-conversion device at the fourth time. At a fifth time, the first voltage level from the capacitance of the photo-conversion device of the active pixel sensor sampled and held to the signal conditioning and readout circuit. The sampled and held first voltage level and the sampled and held second voltage level is transferred to an output of the signal conditioning and readout circuit for transfer to external circuitry. The external circuitry differentially compares the sampled and held first voltage level and the sampled and held second voltage level such that the difference of the sampled and held first voltage level and the sampled and held second voltage level determines performance of the active pixel sensor.

In a second embodiment the test voltage selection circuit has a first voltage distribution line containing a first distribution voltage level and a second voltage distribution line containing a second distribution voltage level. The test voltage selection circuit has a first switch. The first switch has a first terminal connected to a first voltage source that provides the first voltage level, a second terminal connected to the first voltage distribution line, a third terminal connected to the second voltage distribution line, and a control terminal connected to the timing and control circuit to selectively connect the first terminal to the second and third terminals concurrently. The test voltage selection circuit further has a second switch. The second switch has a first terminal connected to a second voltage source that provides the second voltage level, a second terminal connected to the first voltage distribution line, a third terminal connected to the second voltage distribution line, and a control terminal connected to the timing and control circuit to selectively connect the first terminal to the second and third terminals concurrently. The test voltage selection circuit has a third switch. The third switch has a first terminal connected to the first voltage source, a second terminal connected to the second voltage source, a third terminal connected to the first voltage distribution line, a fourth terminal connected to the second voltage distribution line, and a control terminal connected to the timing and control circuit to selectively connect the first terminal to the third terminal and concurrently connect the second terminal to the fourth terminal. Additionally, the test voltage selection circuit has a voltage divider. The voltage divider is

connected between the first voltage distribution line, and connected to the reference distribution node of each active pixel sensor on a row of active pixel sensors for the array of active pixel sensors for distributing an incremental voltage level that varies fractionally from the first distributed voltage level present at the first voltage distribution line to the second distributed voltage level present at the second voltage distribution line. The test voltage selection circuit includes a current measuring device connected so as to measure current flowing from the first voltage source.

In the second embodiment of the test voltage selection circuit the timing and control circuit enables measurement of the average capacitance of the photo-conversion device within a group of active pixel sensors of the array of active pixel sensors by selecting the group of active pixel sensors, at a first time. During a period of time between a second time and a third time, the second switch is activated to connect the first terminal of the second switch to the second terminal and third terminal of the second switch to apply the second voltage level to the first and second voltage distribution lines and thus to the reference distribution node of each active pixel sensor of the group of active pixel sensors. Simultaneously, during the period between the second time and the third time, the second voltage level is coupled to the capacitance of the photo-conversion device of each active pixel sensor of the group of active pixel sensors to charge the capacitance to the second voltage level. During a period of time between a fourth time and a fifth time, the first switch is activated to connect the first

terminal of the first switch concurrently to the second and third terminals of the first switch to apply the first voltage level to the first and second voltage distribution lines and thus to the reference distribution node of each active pixel sensor of the group of active pixel sensors. Simultaneously, during the period

5 between the fourth and fifth time, the first voltage level is coupled to the capacitance of the photo-conversion device of each active pixel sensor of the group of active pixel sensors to charge the capacitance of the photo-conversion device to the first voltage level. The current flowing from the first voltage source to charge the capacitance of the photo-conversion device of each active pixel

10 sensor of the group of active pixel sensors is then measured. The total capacitance of the photo-conversion devices of the group of active pixel sensors and a parasitic capacitance of the test voltage select circuit is determined by the formula:

$$C_T = \frac{I_T}{dV/dt_{CT}}$$

15 where

C_T is the total capacitance of the photo-conversion devices and the parasitic capacitance of the test voltage select circuit,

I_T is the current flowing from the first voltage source,

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dv is the difference between the first voltage level and the second voltage level, and

dt_{CT} is a charging time for the total capacitance;

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The parasitic capacitance is now measured by activating the second switch to connect the first terminal of the second switch to connect the second terminal and third terminal of the second switch to apply the second voltage level to the first and second voltage distribution lines and thus to the reference distribution node of each active pixel sensor of the group of active pixel sensors, during a period of time between a sixth time and a seventh time. The first switch is then activated to connect the first terminal of the first switch concurrently to the second and third terminals of the first switch to apply the first voltage level to the first and second voltage distribution lines and thus to the reference distribution node of each active pixel sensor of the group of active pixel sensors, during a period of time between an eighth time and a ninth time. The current flowing from the first voltage source to charge the parasitic capacitance of the test voltage select circuit is then measured. The parasitic capacitance of the test voltage select circuit is determined by the formula:

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$$C_P = \frac{I_P}{dv/dt_{CP}}$$

where

C_P is the parasitic capacitance of the test voltage select circuit,

I_P is the current flowing to the parasitic capacitance C_P during charging from the second voltage level to the first voltage level,

dv is a difference between the first voltage level and the second voltage level, and

dt_{CP} is a charging time for the parasitic capacitance,

The average capacitance of the photo-conversion device of each of the active pixel sensors of the group of active pixel sensors is determined by the formula:

$$\overline{C_{FD}} = \frac{C_T - C_P}{n}$$

where

$\overline{C_{FD}}$ is the average capacitance of the photodiode,

C_T is the total capacitance,

C_p is the parasitic capacitance, and

n is a number of active pixel sensors of the group of active pixel sensors.

5 The second embodiment of the timing and control circuit enables testing functionality of a group of at least one active pixel sensor by, at a first time, selecting the group of active pixel sensors. During a period of time between a second time and a third time, the third switch is activated to apply the first voltage level to the first voltage distribution line and to apply the second voltage level to
10 the second voltage distribution line such that one of the incremental voltage levels is applied to the reference distribution node of each active pixel sensor of the group of active pixel sensors. Simultaneously, during the period between the second and third time, the incremental voltage level is coupled to the capacitance of the photo-conversion device of each active pixel sensor to the row of active
15 pixel sensors to charge the capacitance of the photo-conversion device to the incremental voltage level. The incremental voltage level present on the capacitance of the photo-conversion device of each of the active pixel sensors of the group of active pixel sensors is sampled and held within the signal conditioning and readout circuit, during a period of time between a fourth time
20 and a fifth time. The first switch is activated to apply the first voltage level to the first voltage distribution line and the second voltage distribution line to place the first voltage level at the reference distribution node of each active pixel sensor of

the group of active pixel sensors during a period of time between a sixth time and a seventh time. Simultaneously, during the period of time between the sixth time and the seventh time, the first voltage level is coupled from the reference distribution node to the capacitance of the photo-conversion device of each

5 active pixel sensor of the group of active pixel sensors to charge the capacitance of the photo-conversion device from the incremental voltage level to the first voltage level. The first voltage level present on the capacitance of the photo-conversion device of each active pixel sensor of the group of active pixel sensors is sampled and held within the signal conditioning and readout circuit during a

10 period of time between an eighth time and a ninth time. The sampled and held incremental voltage level present of the capacitance of the photo-conversion device of each of the active pixel sensors of the group of active pixel sensors and the sampled and held first voltage level of each of the active pixel sensors of the group of active pixel sensors are placed at an output port of the signal

15 conditioning and readout circuit for transfer to external circuitry. The external circuitry differentially compares the sampled and held increment voltage level and the first voltage level, thus determining the functionality of each active pixel sensor of the group of active pixel sensors, and the chain of circuitry connected to each active pixel sensor of the group of active pixel sensors is determined as a

20 function of a difference between the sampled and held incremental voltage level and the sampled and held first voltage level.

The timing and control circuit enables evaluating performance of a group of at least one active pixel sensor of the array of active pixel sensors by at a first time, selecting the group of active pixel sensors. Then during a period of time between a second time and a third time, the second switch is activated to apply

5 the second voltage level to the voltage distribution line such that the second voltage level is applied to the reference distribution node of each active pixel sensor of the group of active pixel sensors. Simultaneously, during the period of time between the second and third time, the second voltage level is coupled to

10 the capacitance of the photo-conversion device of each active pixel sensor to the row of active pixel sensors to charge the capacitance of the photo-conversion device to the second voltage level. The second voltage level present on the capacitance of the photo-conversion device of each of the active pixel sensors of the group of active pixel sensors is sampled and held within the signal

15 conditioning and readout circuit during a period of time between a fourth time and a fifth time. During a period of time between a sixth time and a seventh time, the first switch is activated to apply the first voltage level to the first voltage distribution line and the second voltage distribution line to place the first voltage level at the reference distribution node of each active pixel sensor of the group of active pixel sensors. Simultaneously, during the period of time between the sixth

20 time and the seventh time, the first voltage level is coupled from the reference distribution node to the capacitance of the photo-conversion device of each active pixel sensor of the group of active pixel sensors to charge the capacitance of the photo-conversion device from the incremental voltage level to the first

voltage level. The first voltage level present on the capacitance of each active pixel sensor of the group of active pixel sensors is sampled and held within the signal conditioning and readout circuit during a period of time between an eighth time and a ninth time. The sampled and held second voltage level present on the capacitance of the photo-conversion device of each of the active pixel sensors of the group of active pixel sensors and the sampled and held first voltage level of each of the active pixel sensors of the group of active pixel sensors are placed at an output port of the signal conditioning and readout circuit for transfer to external circuitry. The external circuitry differentially compares the sampled and held second voltage level and the first voltage level, thus determining performance of each active pixel sensor of the group of active pixel sensors and of the chain of circuitry connected to each active pixel sensor of the group of active pixel sensors is determined as a function of a difference between the sampled and held incremental voltage level and the sampled and held first voltage level.

The group of active pixel sensors being tested for functionality, evaluated for performance and having its capacitance measured is usually a row of an array of active pixel sensors. The group of active pixel sensors can be a row of active pixel sensors placed in an area of dark pixels of the array of active pixel sensors at an edge of the array of active pixel sensors.

The evaluating performance of each active pixel sensor of the group of active pixel sensors includes evaluating range and linearity of each active pixel sensor and the chain of circuitry connected to active pixel sensor.

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Brief Description of the Drawings

Fig. 1. is a schematic of an active pixel sensor of the prior art.

Fig 2. is a schematic of an active pixel sensor output signal conditioning and readout circuit of the prior art.

Fig. 3. is a schematic of a structure of an active pixel sensor to measure the capacitance of the photo-diode of an active pixel sensor of the prior art.

Fig 4. is a schematic of a test system for an active pixel sensor of this invention.

Fig 5. is a schematic of an array of testable active pixel sensor cells of this invention.

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Fig. 6. is a schematic of an array of testable active pixel sensor cells employing a test signal voltage selection circuit for use in functional testing of an APS array for range and linearity of this invention.

5 Fig 7a. is a signal timing diagram for a method to test and verify an active pixel sensor readout chain of this invention.

Fig 7b. is a signal timing diagram for a method to evaluate performance an active pixel sensor readout chain of this invention.

10 Fig 7c. is a signal timing diagram for a method to measure the capacitance of the photo-conversion device of an active pixel sensor of this invention.

15 Fig. 8. is a signal timing diagram for the method of Fig. 6a to test and verify an active pixel sensor readout chain of this invention illustrating functional test results of an active pixel sensor readout as a function of physical location.

20 Fig 9a. is a flow diagram for a method validate functioning of an active pixel sensor readout chain of this invention.

Fig 9b. is a flow diagram for a method to test and verify an active pixel sensor readout chain of this invention.

Fig 9c. is a flow diagram for a method to evaluate performance an active pixel sensor readout chain of this invention.

5 Fig 9d. is a flow for a method to measure the capacitance of the photo-conversion device of an active pixel sensor of this invention.

Detailed Description of the Invention

10 The new Design-for-Test (DFT) structure of the present invention is shown in Fig. 4. The drains of the transistors **M1** and **M2** are connected respectively to the power supply distribution line **V_{DD}** and the reference voltage distribution line **RD**, respectively. The power supply distribution line **V_{DD}** is driven by a fixed voltage source set at a value equal to the power supply voltage level **V_{DD}** required by the target semiconductor manufacturing process. However, instead of connecting to the same fixed voltage of **V_{DD}** as described above, the **RD** node is switched between two external voltage levels, **V1** and **V2**, through the switches **S1** and **S2** which are implemented as CMOS switches. The clock signals controlling the activation of the switches **S1** and **S2** should be non-overlapping to prevent excess current flowing between the voltage sources supplying the voltage levels, **V1** and **V2**.

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By holding the reset signal V_{rst} high at the power supply voltage level V_{DD} , the transistor **M2** is fully turned on. By switching the between **V1** and **V2**, where $V1 > V2$, the current I drawn from the voltage source **V1** can be measured by the current measuring device **X1** in this test step.

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Alternately, as another test approach, the reset signal V_{rst} can be pulsed first to reset the **FD** node voltage through **S1** to the node voltage level of **V1**, then pulsed again to discharge the **FD** node through **S2** to **V2**. Since the node **FD** is discharged and then discharged to **V1** and **V2** through the switching sequence,
10 there is no need to test this embodiment of an APS cell using a light source.

The effective capacitance in the area of the photosensitive element may then be calculated, which includes both the interconnect parasitic capacitance of the circuitry in the area of the **RD** node and the capacitance C_{FD} of the photo-
15 diode **D_F**. The effective capacitance is:

$$C_T = C_P + C_{FD}$$

where

C_T is the total capacitance of the test voltage
20 select circuit and the capacitance of the node **FD**.

C_P is the parasitic capacitance of the test voltage select circuit.

C_{FD} is the capacitance of the node **FD** of a pixel.

5 It is well-known in the art that the total capacitance is determined by the equation

$$C_T = \frac{I_T}{dV/dt}$$

where:

10 I is the current measured by the current measuring device **X1** of.

dv is the difference between the voltage level **V1** and the voltage level **V2**.

dt is the period required for the capacitance C_T to charge.

15 and the parasitic capacitance is determined by the equation:

$$C_P = \frac{I_P}{dV/dt}$$

where:

20 I_p is the current measured by the current measuring device **X1**.

dv is the difference between the voltage level $V1$ and the voltage level $V2$.

dt is the period required for the capacitance C_P to charge,

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The net capacitance at the APS floating diffusion of the photosensitive element is therefore:

$$C_{FD} = C_T - C_P$$

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As a result with the present invention's testable APS pixel circuit and above test steps, the net capacitance C_{FD} of the photo-conversion device D_F can be tested and calculated without the need for an external light source.

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The testable APS pixel circuit of this invention can also be incorporated with an embodiment of supporting design-for-test (DFT) structures to verify key properties of the functionality of the associated APS pixel's signal conditioning readout circuitry **Sig C/R**. With proper timing of switch control signals for **S1** and **S2**, a known voltage can be established on the floating diffusion node **FD**

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just before the pixel readout operation. This known voltage undergoes the full readout operation and the corresponding output can be compared with the expected output. Any deviation of the measured output from the expected output indicates non-ideal effects along the complete readout chain. Thus the

functionality such as range and linearity of the complete signal conditioning and readout chain can be verified.

The operational mode for the testable APS cell of this invention is

5 activated by closing switch **S1** to connect the voltage level **V1** to the read distribution line **RD**. During the normal operation, the voltage level **V1** is set to the level of the power supply voltage source **V_{DD}**. The testable APS pixel cell is reset by turning on the transistor **M2** bringing the reset line **V_{rst}** to a high level. The capacitance **C_{FD}** is charged to the voltage level **V1** which turns on the

10 transistor **M1**. The row select signal **V_{row}** is then activated and the reference level of the node **FD** is sampled by the signal conditioning and readout circuit **Sig C/R** as described above. The reset signal line **V_{rst}** disables the transistor **M2**. The light exposes the photodiode **D_F** and as described above, electrons are collected at the node **FD**. After an integration time, the signal conditioning and

15 readout circuit **Sig C/R** senses the collected charge of the node **FD**, conditions the signals and provides the readout as also described above.

A preferred embodiment of this functionally-testable APS pixel cell circuit invention is shown in Fig. 5 as a testable APS array subsystem. The pixel array

20 is formed of rows and columns of interconnected testable APS cells of this invention as shown in Fig. 4. The row decode driver circuit provides, at the appropriate time, the row select signal **V_{row}** to one row of the pixel array. Each column of the testable APS cells in the pixel array is connected to a signal

conditioning and readout circuit **Sig C/R** at the base of each column. The signal conditioning and readout circuits **Sig C/R** are interconnected to provide the image output signal V_{sig_out} and the reference output signal V_{rs_out} . The image output signal V_{sig_out} and the reference output signal V_{rst_out} are differentially compared to determine the intensity of light illuminating the pixel array.

The timing and control circuit provides the appropriate timing and control signals to the row decode driver and the signal conditioning and readout circuit **Sig C/R** during normal operation. When the test mode signal is activated to place the pixel array in the test mode, the timing and control circuit creates the appropriate timing and control signals to the test voltage select circuit to control the voltage levels **V1** and **V2** on the read voltage distribution line **RD** for each row of the pixel array.

In a second embodiment of the testable APS subsystem shown in Fig 6, a resistor string $R_1, R_2, \dots, R_{n-1},$ and R_n is used as the voltage divider to generate different voltage levels between the voltage levels **V1** and **V2**. The resistor string $R_1, R_2, \dots, R_{n-1},$ and R_n is connected at tap points to the reference distribution node **RD** of each pixel cell such that each pixel cell has a unique voltage level that is a function of the location of the tap point on the resistor string $R_1, R_2, \dots, R_{n-1},$ and R_n . Therefore the voltage levels that will be fed to the pixel **RD** nodes are predetermined and known, provided that the two terminal voltages are known. Connecting to the resistor string $R_1, R_2, \dots, R_{n-1},$ and R_n at intervals has

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several advantages. One advantage is to reduce the RC time constant so each node can settle faster. In addition, the voltage step between the neighboring APS pixel cells is larger so the effect of circuit noise on signal integrity and test accuracy is reduced.

5

To verify the signal conditioning and readout circuit **Sig C/R** functionality in this test step, the voltages **V1** and **V2** should be set to different levels. In normal implementations of this test approach in order to satisfy design practice requirements of typical semiconductor manufacturing processes, both **V1** and **V2** should be less than one transistor threshold below the supply voltage to ensure that when **M2** is turned on, **M2** is in the linear region of operation and the voltage on **RD** can be driven or passed on to the **FD** node.

10

The signal timing diagram of Fig. 7a illustrates timing signals created by the timing and control circuit of Fig. 6 during normal operation. At the time t_0 , the timing and control circuit provides a signal to the row decoder driver to select a row of pixels by changing the row select signal V_{row} from a low voltage level (0V) to a high voltage level (V_{DD}). The switch **S₁** is activated such that the reference distribution line **RD** of each pixel of the selected row of pixels is set at voltage level **V1**. For normal operation, the voltage level **V1** is set to the power supply voltage level (V_{DD}).

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At the time T_1 , the reset signal V_{rst} changes from the low voltage level (0V) to the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to activate the transistor **M2** and charge the capacitance C_{FD} of the node **FD** to the voltage level **V1**. The voltage level **V1** acts as a reference voltage level for the operation.

5

Since the row select signal V_{row} is set to the voltage level (V_{DD}) and the node **FD** is also at the voltage level (V_{DD}), the transistors **M1** and **M3** are turned on and the voltage V_{out_pixel} at the output of the pixel is set to the power supply voltage level (V_{DD}).

10

At the time t_2 , the reset signal changes from the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to the low voltage level (0V) to deactivate the transistor **M2**. The reference sample and hold signal **SHR** is changed from the low voltage level (0V) to the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to activate the sampling of the voltage signal present on the column bus ColBus. The sampling of the voltage on the column bus ColBus is completed at time t_4 .

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The reset signal V_{rst} changes from the low voltage level (0V) to the high voltage level (V_{DD}) at time t_5 to again turn on the transistor **M2** and charge the capacitance C_{FD} at the node **FD** to the reference voltage level **V1**. At the time t_6 , the reset signal changes from the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to the low voltage level (0V) to deactivate the transistor **M2**.

20

In the time interval t_6 to t_7 , the light impinging upon the photodiode **DF** causes the photo-generated electrons to modify the voltage level of the node **FD** which is translated through the source-follower transistor **M1** to the output voltage level V_{out_pixel} .

5

At the time t_7 , the sense sample hold signal **SHS** changes from a low voltage level (0V) to a high voltage level (V_{DD}) to activate the signal conditioning and readout circuit to acquire the voltage level indicating the level of light impinging on the pixel.

10

The signal timing diagram of Fig. 7b illustrates the timing of the signals necessary to verify the functioning of the signal conditioning and readout circuit **Sig C/R** of Fig. 6 and evaluate the pixel signal of each pixel within a row to insure proper operation of each signal. The method of verification of functionality and evaluating proper operation begins at the time t_0 by changing the row select signal for the chosen row from the low voltage level (0V) to the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to turn on transistor **M₃**. At time t_1 , the switch **S₃** is activated to apply the voltage level **V1** to the voltage distribution line DFTN1 and the voltage level **V2** to the voltage distribution line DFTN2. Applying the voltage level **V1** to the voltage distribution line DFTN1 and the voltage level **V2** to the voltage distribution line DFTN₂ cause the resistor string **R₁, R₂, ..., R_{n-1}, R_n** to act as a voltage divider. Also at the time t_1 , the reset signal **V_{rst}** changes from the low voltage level (0V) to the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to turn on the transistor **M2**. Thus the voltage to

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each pixel of the row is incrementally varied from the voltage level **V1** to the voltage level **V2**.

Since the row select signal has turned on, the pixel output voltage V_{out_pixel} rises to a voltage level that is a voltage threshold level of the transistor **M2** less than the voltage level present at the node **FD**.

At the time t_2 , the switch **S3** is deactivated and the reset signal V_{rst} changes from the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to the low voltage level (0V) turning off the transistor **M2**. At the time t_3 , the sense sample and hold signal **SHS** changes from the low voltage level (0V) to the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to cause the signal conditioning and readout circuit **Sig C/R** to sample and retain the voltage V_{out_pixel} present at the output of the pixel. At the time t_4 , the sense sample and hold signal **SHS** changes from the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to the low voltage level (0V) to deactivate the signal conditioning and readout circuit **Sig C/R**.

At the time t_5 , the switch **S1** is activated to apply the voltage level **V1** to the reference voltage node **RD** of each pixel of the selected row. Also at time t_5 , the reset signal V_{rst} changes from the low voltage level (0V) to the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to turn on the transistor **M2** and allow the capacitance C_{FD} at the node **FD** to charge to the voltage level **V1** and thus allowing the voltage level V_{out_pixel} at the output of the pixel to reach a voltage level that is a threshold voltage V_T less than the voltage level **V1**.

The reset signal change from the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to the low voltage level (0V) to deactivate the transistor **M2** and the switch **S1** is deactivated at the time t_6 .

5

The reference sample and hold signal **SHR** changes from the low voltage level (0V) to the high voltage level (V_{DD}) at the time t_7 to activate the signal conditioning and readout circuit **Sig C/R** to sample and retain the reference voltage level. The reference sample and hold signal **SHR** is changed from the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to the low voltage level (0V) at the time t_8 . The sensed signal output V_{sig_out} and the reference signal output V_{rst_out} are differentially compared to determine the voltage that is present at each node **FD** of each pixel.

10

Since the voltage at each node **FD** of each pixel varies incrementally from the voltage level **V2** to the voltage level **V1**, the output voltage of the signal

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conditioning and readout circuit **Sig C/R** will vary incrementally, dependent on the position of the connection of each to the resistor string $R_1, R_2, \dots, R_{n-1}, R_n$.

Since the values of the voltage level **V1** and **V2** are known, the linearity and functioning of the pixel and the intermediate circuitry can be determined. Fig. 8 shows the results of testing a row of pixels as described above. As each pixel in

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the row is evaluated, the voltage level is recorded according to its position on the row. As is shown, the voltage level varies incrementally between zero volts and the difference between the voltage levels **V1** and **V2** depending on its position in the row and its connection location to the resistor string $R_1, R_2, \dots, R_{n-1}, R_n$.

Fig. 7c illustrates the timing diagram of the testable APS array of this invention to evaluate the performance and linearity of the pixel array and the signal conditioning and readout circuit **Sig C/R**. At the time t_0 , the row select signal changes from the low voltage level (0V) to the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to activate the transistor **M3** of each pixel on the selected row. At the time t_1 , the switch **S2** is activated to place the voltage level **V2** at the reference distribution node **RD** of each pixel of the selected row. The voltage level **V2** is chosen to emulate the voltage level achieved during the exposure of the photodiode **DF** to impinging light. Also at the time t_1 , the reset signal V_{rst} changes from the low voltage level (0V) to the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to turn on the transistor **M2** such that the capacitance C_{FD} at the node **FD** is charged to the voltage level **V2**. The switch **S2** is deactivated and the reset signal V_{rst} is changed from the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to from the low voltage level (0V) to turn off the transistor **M2**.

The voltage V_{out_pixel} present at the output of the pixel is to be set to a threshold voltage V_T lower than the voltage level **V2**. At the time t_3 , the sense sample and hold signal **SHS** is activated such that the signal conditioning and readout circuit **Sig C/R** is activate to capture and retain the voltage level V_{out_pixel} . At the time t_4 , the sense sample and hold signal **SHS** changes from the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to from the low voltage level (0V) to deactivate the signal conditioning and readout circuit **Sig C/R**.

At the time t_5 , the switch **S1** is activated to place the voltage level **V1** at the reference distribution node **RD** of each pixel of the row of the row of pixels. Also at time t_5 , the reset signal V_{rst} changes from the low voltage level (0V) to the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to activate the transistor **M2** so as to charge the capacitance C_{FD} at the node **FD** to the voltage level **V1**. The voltage level V_{out_pixel} at the output of the pixel thus rises to a voltage level that is a threshold voltage V_T less than the voltage level **V1**. At the time t_6 , the switch **S1** is deactivated and the reset signal V_{rst} changes from the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to the low voltage level (0V) turning off the transistor **M2**.

The reference sample and hold signal **SHR** changes from the low voltage level (0V) to the high voltage level (V_{DD}) at time t_7 to activate the signal conditioning and readout circuit **Sig C/R** to capture the reference voltage level at the output of the pixel V_{out_pixel} . At the time t_8 , the reference sample and hold signal **SHR** changes from the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to the low voltage level (0V) to deactivate the signal conditioning and readout circuit **Sig C/R**.

The reference output signal V_{rst_out} and the sense output signal V_{sig_out} are differentially compared to determine the performance of the total chain of circuitry from the pixel to the column bus ColBus to the signal conditioning and readout circuit **Sig C/R**. The voltage level difference between reference output signal V_{rst_out} and the sense output signal V_{sig_out} represents the magnitude of the voltage difference between the voltage level **V1** and the voltage level **V2**. The

voltage level differences of the reference output signal V_{rst_out} and the sense output signal V_{sig_out} for each pixel on the selected row of pixels are recorded, and operational parameters such as linearity and range for each testable APS cell of the selected row of pixels, each column bus ColBus and signal

- 5 conditioning and readout circuit **Sig C/R** are extracted from the recorded voltage level differences.

The testable APS cell coupled to the test voltage select circuit TestVSelect of Fig. 6 is used to measure the total capacitance C_{FD} of the row of pixels.

- 10 Referring to Fig. 6, the voltage sources V_{s1} and V_{s2} provide the voltage levels **V1** and **V2** to the test voltage select circuit. In series with the voltage source V_{s1} is a current measuring device **X1** to determine the current I flowing from the voltage source V_{s1} to the test voltage select circuit. Refer back to Fig. 7d for the description of the method to measure the total capacitance C_{FD} for all the pixels
- 15 on the selected row. The row select signal is held at the low voltage level (0V) to keep the transistor **M2** turned off. At the time t_0 , the reset signal V_{rst} changes from the low voltage level (**V0**) to the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to activate the transistor **M2** of each APS pixel cell. At the time t_1 , the switch **S2** is activated to place the voltage level **V2** at the reference distribution node **RD** of each pixel on
- 20 the row of pixels. Once all the capacitances C_{FD} at the node **FD** of each pixel is charged to the voltage level **V2**, the switch **S2** is deactivated at the time t_2 . The switch **S1** is activated at the time t_3 to place the voltage level **V1** at the reference distribution node **RD** of each pixel. As the capacitance C_{FD} of all the pixels on

the selected row are charged, the current I is recorded by the current measurement device **X1** of Fig. 6. When all the capacitances C_{FD} of the node **FD** of all the pixels have charged to the voltage level **V1**, the switch **S1** is deactivated at the time t_5 .

5

The total capacitance charged is the parasitic capacitance of the test voltage select circuit and the capacitance C_{FD} of the node **FD** of all the pixels as shown by the equation:

10

$$C_T = C_P + \sum_1^n C_{FD}$$

where

C_T is the total capacitance of the test voltage select circuit and the capacitance of the node **FD**.

15

C_P is the parasitic capacitance of the test voltage select circuit.

C_{FD} is the capacitance of the node **FD** of a pixel.

n is the number of pixels on the selected row.

20

It is well-known in the art that the total capacitance is determined by the equation:

$$C_T = \frac{I_T}{dv/dt}$$

where:

I is the current measured by the current measuring device **X1** of Fig. 6.

dv is the difference between the voltage level **V1** and the voltage level **V2**.

dt is the period required for the capacitance to charge or the time elapsed from the time t_3 to t_4 ,

If the transistor **M2** of all the pixels on a selected row of pixels is turned off and the previous method of setting the voltage at the reference distribution node **RD** of each pixel to the voltage level **V2**, then to the voltage level **V1**, and then observing the charging current I is followed, the parasitic capacitance C_P of the test voltage select circuit can then be determined. To accomplish this, the reset signal V_{rst} is changed from the high voltage level (V_{DD}) to the low voltage level (OV) at the time t_6 to deactivate the transistor **M2** of all the pixels of the selected row of pixels. At the time t_7 , the switch **S2** is activated to place the voltage level **V2** at the reference distribution node **RD** of all of the pixels. When the parasitic capacitance C_P of the test voltage select circuit is charged to the voltage level **V2**, the switch **S2** is deactivated at the time t_8 . At the time t_9 , the switch **S1** is activated to charge the parasitic capacitance C_P of the test voltage select circuit from the voltage level **V2** to the voltage level **V1**. The current I from the voltage

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source **V_{s1}** is measured by the current measurement device **X1**. When the reference distribution node **RD** of all of the pixels on the selected row are charged to the voltage level **V1**, the switch **S1** is deactivated.

5 The parasitic capacitance **C_P** is determined by the equation:

$$C_P = \frac{I_P}{dV/dt}$$

where:

I_p is the current measured by the current measuring device **X1** of Fig. 6.

dv is the difference between the voltage level **V1** and the voltage level **V2**.

dt is the period required for the capacitance to charge or the time elapsed from the time **t₉** to **t₁₀**,

The total capacitance **C_{FD_TOT}** of the nodes **FD** of all the pixels then is determined by the equation:

$$C_{FD_TOT} = C_T - C_P$$

The average node capacitance $\overline{C_{FD}}$ of the nodes **FD** of all the pixels then is determined by the equation:

$$\overline{C_{FD}} = \frac{C_T - C_P}{n}$$

The testable APS cell of this invention, as described above, is configured
 5 as an array of testable APS cells. A row of the testable APS cells can be placed
 at the edge of an array of APS cells of the prior art. The row of testable APS
 cells are placed at the edge of the array opposite the signal conditioning and
 readout circuit **Sig C/R**.

10 Further, the peripheral rows of APS cells are marked to prevent light from
 impinging on the photodiodes **D_F** of the APS cell. These are commonly referred
 to as "dark" pixels.

Since no external light source is needed to verify the functionality of the
 15 testable APS and associated readout circuit of this invention, there is no need for
 optical setup during this particular testing phase of the testable APS pixel circuits.
 An advantage of the part of the present invention's test steps is that it can be
 used to pre-screen the APS sensor chips, and, when found by these test steps,
 to reject the chips with defective APS cell and readout circuitry before they
 20 undergo the final optical test. In addition, a row of selected testable APS pixel
 cells can be placed as part of the "dark" pixels surrounding the active pixel array,
 typically as the top-most or bottom-most row, since the resistor string needs to be
 close by. Another advantage of this invention is that, in this approach of this

embodiment of the invention, the array regularity needed for layout and routing chip physical design and area efficiency is preserved since the additional routing is outside of the pixel array.

5 In summary, one advantage of this invention is that the photosensitive element and parasitic capacitance test measurement can be done in a dark environment. This allows the testable APS cells required for test and measurement of APS imaging products to be part of the “dark” pixels used to measure and project reliability and functional quality of an overall sensor chip. A
10 further advantage is that the DFT structure of this invention enables the measurement and verification of the testable APS pixel readout circuit functionality without the need to use a dedicated optical sensor and associated design and test circuitry.

15 Refer now to Figs. 9a – 9d to discuss the method to verify performance of a row of active pixel sensors. The steps of the method as shown in Fig. 9a are to test the functionality **100** of each APS on the selected row of APS's and the chain of circuitry connected to the APS's on the row of APS's. The chain of circuitry tested is the column bus connected to each APS of a column of APS's of Fig. 4
20 and the signal conditioning and readout circuit **Sig C/R** of Fig. 4. The next step of the method of this invention evaluates the performance **200** of each APS of the selected row of APS's and the chain of circuitry connected to each APS. The evaluation of the performance determines the range and linearity of the APS and

the connected chain of circuitry to insure the accurate determination of the light impinging on the APS's.

The next step of the method of this invention is the determination of an average capacitance per APS for a row of APS's.

The sequential order of the steps of the method of this invention is not unique. The steps may be performed in any order. Further, the method for verifying performance may include only one of the steps as listed or any combination of the steps as shown.

Refer now to Fig. 9b for a discussion of the testing of the functionality of a row of APS's and the chain of circuitry connected to each APS. The row of APS's whose functionality is to be tested are selected **105**. In Fig. 4 the row select signal V_{row} is activated to connect each APS on the row to the column bus and through the column bus to the signal conditioning and readout circuit **SIG C/R**. The capacitance C_{FD} of the photodiode D_F of each APS of a selected row of APS's of Fig. 6 is charged **110** to one of a group of incremental voltages. These incremental voltages vary from the voltage level **V2** to the voltage level **V1** as above-described and are formed by the voltage divider created by the resistor string $R_1, R_2, \dots, R_{n-1}, R_n$ of Fig. 6.

To charge the capacitance C_{FD} to the incremental voltage level, the switch **S3** is activated to place the first voltage distribution line **DFTN1** and the second voltage level **V2** on the second voltage distribution line **DFTN2**. The voltage divider formed by the resistor string $R_1, R_2, \dots, R_{n-1}, R_n$ then forms the incremental voltages. At the time the switch **S3** is activated, the reset signal V_{rst} turns on the transistor **M2** to allow the capacitance C_{FD} to charge to the incremental voltage level present at the reference distribution node **RD**.

The incremental voltage present on the capacitance C_{FD} is buffered by the source follower formed by the transistor **M1** such that the output signal V_{out_pixel} at the output of the APS is approximately a threshold voltage V_T lower than the incremental voltage present at the capacitance C_{FD} .

The voltage V_{out_pixel} at the output of the APS representing the magnitude of the voltage that has charged the capacitance C_{FD} is sampled and held **115** by the signal conditioning and readout circuit **SIG C/R**.

The capacitance C_{FD} of the photodiode **D_{FD}** of each APS of the row of selected APS's is now charged **120** to the voltage level **V1**. To accomplish this,

the switch **S1** of Fig. 6 is activated to place the first voltage level **V1** on the voltage distribution lines **DFTN1** and **DFTN2**, and thus to the reference distribution node **RD**. At this same time, the reset signal **V_{rst}** turns on the transistor **M2** to charge the capacitance **C_{FD}** to the voltage level **V1**.

5

The voltage level **V1** present on the capacitance **C_{FD}** is buffered by the source follower formed by the transistor **M1** such that the output signal **V_{out_pixel}** at the output of the APS is approximately a threshold voltage level **V_T** lower than the voltage level **V1** present at the capacitance **C_{FD}**.

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The voltage **V_{out_pixel}** at the output of the APS representing the magnitude of the voltage that has charged the capacitance **C_{FD}** is sampled and held **125** by the signal conditioning and readout circuit **SIG C/R**.

15

The sampled and held incremental voltage and the sampled and held voltage level **V1** are differentially compared **130** to form a difference signal. The magnitude of the difference signals of the APS's on the selected row of APS's are compared to determine **135** that all the APS's of the selected row of APS's are functioning and the chain of circuitry connected to each APS is also

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functioning.

Refer now to Fig. 9c for a discussion of evaluating performance **200** of a row of APS's and the chain of circuitry connected to each APS. The row of APS's whose functionality is to be tested are selected **205**. In Fig. 4 the row select signal V_{row} is activated to connect each APS on the row to the column bus and through the column bus to the signal conditioning and readout circuit **SIG C/R**. The capacitance C_{FD} of the photodiode D_{FD} of each APS of a selected row of APS's of Fig. 6 is charged **210** to the voltage level $V2$.

To charge the capacitance C_{FD} to the voltage level $V2$, the switch **S3** is activated to place the voltage level $V2$ on the first and second voltage distribution lines **DFTN1** and **DFTN2**. At the time the switch **S3** is activated, the reset signal V_{rst} turns on the transistor **M2** to allow the capacitance C_{FD} to charge to the voltage level $V2$ present at the reference distribution node **RD**.

The voltage level $V2$ present on the capacitance C_{FD} is buffered by the source follower formed by the transistor **M1** such that the output signal V_{out_pixel} at the output of the APS is approximately a threshold voltage V_T lower than the voltage level $V2$ present at the capacitance C_{FD} .

The voltage $V_{\text{out_pixel}}$ at the output of the APS representing the magnitude of the voltage that has charged the capacitance C_{FD} is sampled and held **215** by the signal conditioning and readout circuit **SIG C/R**.

- 5 The capacitance C_{FD} of the photodiode D_{FD} of each APS of the row of selected APS's is now charged **220** to the voltage level **V1**. To accomplish this, the switch **S1** of Fig. 6 is activated to place the first voltage level **V1** on the voltage distribution lines **DFTN1** and **DFTN2**, and thus to the reference distribution node **RD**. At this same time, the reset signal V_{rst} turns on the
- 10 transistor **M2** to charge the capacitance C_{FD} to the voltage level **V1**.

- The voltage level **V1** present on the capacitance C_{FD} is buffered by the source follower formed by the transistor **M1** such that the output signal $V_{\text{out_pixel}}$ at the output of the APS is approximately a threshold voltage level V_{T} lower than
- 15 the voltage level **V1** present at the capacitance C_{FD}

The voltage $V_{\text{out_pixel}}$ at the output of the APS representing the magnitude of the voltage that has charged the capacitance C_{FD} is sampled and held **225** by the signal conditioning and readout circuit **SIG C/R**.

The sampled and held voltage level **V2** and the sampled and held voltage level **V1** are differentially compared **230** to form a difference signal. The magnitude of the difference signals of the APS's on the selected row of APS's are compared to determine **235** the performance of each of the APS's of the selected row of APS's and the chain of circuitry connected to each APS. By evaluating the difference voltages, the linearity of the APS's and the attached chain of circuitry is determined.

From the measure of the linearity of the APS's of an array of APS's, the intensity of the light impinging upon the array of APS's can be more accurately determined.

The method for determining **300** an average capacitance C_{FD} per APS of the row of APS's within the array of APS's is first selected **305**. In this case, the row select signal V_{row} may or may not be activated to turn on the transistor **M3** of Fig. 4.

The total capacitance C_T is defined as the capacitance C_{FD} of the photodiodes D_{FD} of all of the APS's on the selected row and the parasitic capacitances C_{P1} and C_{P2} (referred to hereinafter in total as C_P) of the test voltage select circuit of Fig. 6. The total capacitance C_T is charged **310** to the

voltage level **V2**. The switch **S2** of the test voltage select circuit of Fig. 6 is activated to apply the voltage level **V2** to the first and second voltage distribution lines **DFTN1** and **DFTN2**, and thus to the reference distribution nodes **RD** of all of the APS's on the selected row. The parasitic capacitance **C_T** is now charged to the voltage level **V2**. The voltage reset signal **V_{rst}** is simultaneously activated to turn on the transistor **M2** to couple the voltage level **V2** to the capacitance **C_{FD}** of the photodiode **D_{FD}**. The switch **S2** and the reset signal **V_{rst}** are deactivated at the completion of the charging **310** of the total capacitance **C_T** to the voltage level **V2**.

Next, the total capacitance **C_T** is charged **315** from the voltage level **V2** to the voltage level **V1**. The switch **S1** is activated to apply the voltage level **V1** to the first and second voltage distribution lines **DFTN1** and **DFTN2**, and thus to the reference distribution nodes **RD** of all of the APS's on the selected row. The parasitic capacitance **C_P** is now charged to the voltage level **V1**. The reset signal **V_{rst}** is simultaneously activated to turn on the transistor **M2** to couple the voltage level **V1** to charge the capacitance **C_{FD}** of the photodiode **D_{FD}** to the voltage level **V1**.

While the total capacitance **C_T** is being charged, the current determining device **X₁** measures **320** the current **I_T** flowing to the total capacitance **C_T**. Further, the charging period **t_{CT}** to charge the total capacitance **C_T** is measured

325.

The total capacitance C_T is calculated **330** by the formula:

$$C_T = \frac{I_T}{\frac{dV}{dt_{CT}}}$$

5

where

C_T is the total capacitance,

I_T is the current flowing to the total capacitance

C_T during charging from the voltage level **V2** to the voltage level **V1**,

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dv is the difference between the voltage level **V1** and the voltage level **V2**, and

dt_{CT} is the charging period of the total capacitance C_T .

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The parasitic capacitance C_P is charged **335** to the voltage level **V2**. The switch **S2** of the test voltage select circuit of Fig. 6 is activated to apply the voltage level **V2** to the first and second voltage distribution lines **DFTN1** and **DFTN2**, and thus to the reference distribution nodes **RD** of all of the APS's on the

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selected row. The parasitic capacitance C_P is now charged to the voltage level **V2**. The voltage reset signal V_{rst} is not activated to turn on the transistor **M2** to couple the voltage level **V2** to the capacitance C_{FD} of the photodiode **D_{FD}**. The switch **S2** is deactivated at the completion of the charging **335** of the parasitic capacitance C_P to the voltage level **V2**.

Next, the parasitic capacitance C_P is charged **340** from the voltage level **V2** to the voltage level **V1**. The switch **S1** is activated to apply the voltage level **V1** to the first and second voltage distribution lines **DFTN1** and **DFTN2**, and thus to the reference distribution nodes **RD** of all of the APS's on the selected row. The parasitic capacitance C_P is now charged to the voltage level **V1**.

The reset signal V_{rst} again is not activated to turn on the transistor **M2** and the voltage level **V1** is not coupled to the capacitance C_{FD} of the photodiode **D_{FD}** to the voltage level **V1**.

While the parasitic capacitance C_P is being charged, the current determining device **X₁** is measuring **345** the current I_P flowing to the parasitic capacitance C_P . Further, the charging period t_{CP} to charge the parasitic capacitance C_P is measured **350**.

The parasitic capacitance C_P is calculated **355** by the formula:

$$C_P = \frac{I_P}{dv/dt_{CP}}$$

5

where

C_P is the parasitic capacitance,

I_P is the current flowing to the parasitic capacitance C_P during charging from the voltage level **V2** to the voltage level **V1**,

10

dv is the difference between the voltage level **V1** and the voltage level **V2**, and

dt_{CP} is the charging period of the total capacitance C_P .

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The average capacitance $\overline{C_{FD}}$ of the photodiode of the selected row of APS's is calculated **360** by the formula:

$$\overline{C_{FD}} = \frac{C_T - C_P}{n}$$

where

$\overline{C_{FD}}$ is the average capacitance of the
photodiode,

C_T is the total capacitance,

5 C_P is the parasitic capacitance, and

n is the number of APS's in the selected row of
APS's.

The method as described in Fig. 9a generally selects a row for verifying
10 performance of the APS's. It is in keeping with the intent of this invention that
any convenient grouping of APS's can be selected for verifying performance.
Further, it is apparent to those skilled in the art that the grouping of APS's may
contain any number of APS's. An individual APS may be selected to verify
performance.

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While this invention has been particularly shown and described with
reference to the preferred embodiments thereof, it will be understood by those
skilled in the art that various changes in form and details may be made without
departing from the spirit and scope of the invention. Reversing the polarities of
20 the silicon materials implanted in a integrated circuit implementation of the DFT

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APS can easily form a corresponding active pixel sensor circuit with the roles of P-type and N-type CMOS devices reversed. The operational voltage biases and the signal levels shown in each of the figures will also be reversed appropriately.